

# Coming clean on farm-gate hygiene



**In 2018, Vinehealth Australia surveyed South Australian vineyard owners about their farm-gate hygiene activities to understand baseline adoption rate. Three years later, another survey was conducted, and the results show some positive trends.**

**G**rapegrowers are investing more time and money into farm-gate hygiene activities than ever before, according to Vinehealth Australia's 2021 Vineyard Owner Survey.

From 2018 to 2021, an increase in adoption of about 20 percent was measured for regularly inspecting vines and providing farm-gate hygiene training for staff and contractors, followed closely by a 16 percent increase in adoption of vineyard owners verifying the health status of planting material.

"It's very pleasing to see that the adoption of all farm-gate hygiene practices has increased. We know that taking steps forward with farm-gate hygiene activities will help to protect vineyards from pest impact, so this is simply good business practice," Vinehealth Australia CEO Inca Lee said.

## What is farm-gate hygiene?

Farm-gate hygiene activities are site-specific biosecurity practices, such as cleaning machinery before and after use, to minimise risk of pest, disease and weed spread. In some cases simple to implement, these practices can help to keep vineyards safe from major unwanted pests, including phylloxera.

In 2021, Vinehealth Australia conducted a South Australian Vineyard Owner Survey to measure the current and anticipated adoption of nine key non-regulatory farm-gate hygiene practices, the barriers to adoption of these activities, and changes to adoption since the previous survey was undertaken in 2018.

The survey was not designed to measure compliance with regulatory requirements outlined in state-based Plant Quarantine Standards (or equivalent) for the movement of grapes, must, unfiltered juice, marc, machinery and equipment used in vineyards, diagnostic samples and propagation material.

## Nine key non-regulatory farm-gate hygiene activities

1. Ensure clean and safe footwear is worn in the vineyard
2. Use biosecurity signs
3. Keep a visitor log
4. Adopt a clean in/clean out policy for machinery and equipment
5. Do farm-gate hygiene training
6. Restrict access to vines
7. Verify planting material health
8. Do not allow unauthorised vehicles into the vineyard
9. Regularly inspect vines for vine health issues

## What growers are doing and why

When vineyard owners were asked to indicate which of the nine farm-gate hygiene activities they have in place at the vineyards they own or manage and how long they have had each in place for, some interesting trends were noted (see Figure 1).

More than 90 percent of respondents currently regularly inspect their vines, and almost 70 percent do not allow unauthorised vehicles into their vineyards.

"This was not an unexpected result given that there are identifiable financial, operational and safety benefits associated with these activities, outside of biosecurity, so these activities have been well integrated into vineyard operations by the majority of vineyard owners who responded," Inca said.

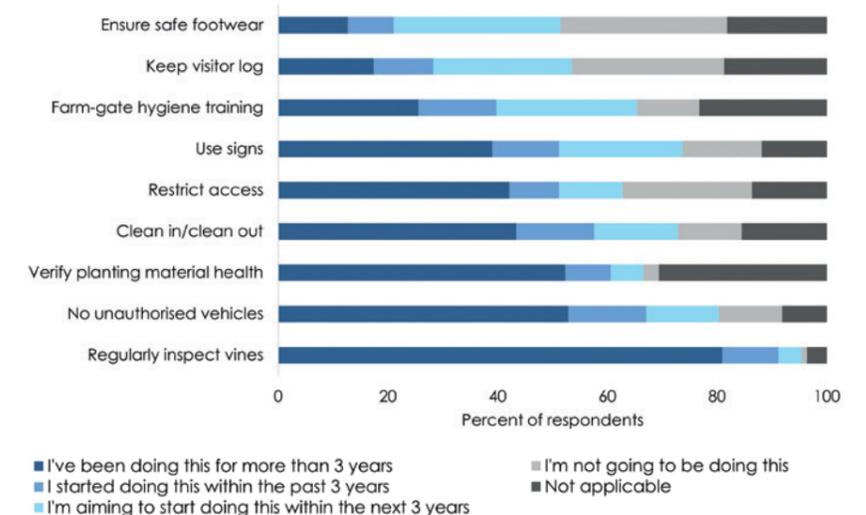
Two other activities also showed pleasing levels of current adoption by respondents, with about 60 percent of respondents verifying the health of planting material prior to planting and practising a clean in/clean out policy with machinery and equipment.

"The rise in adoption of these activities can be linked to the perceived biosecurity risk associated with these activities, which is higher than for many of the other farm-gate hygiene practices. These activities involve introducing potential sources of biosecurity

risk on farm, therefore the perceived risk of not undertaking these activities is elevated," Inca said.

In terms of the activities vineyard owners have actioned most in the past three years, practising a clean in/clean out policy with

Figure 1. Farm-gate hygiene activities and their state of adoption by SA vineyard owners.



machinery and equipment, not allowing unauthorised vehicles into the vineyard and delivering farm-gate hygiene training to all vineyard staff including contract and casual labour lead the list.

“This is really pleasing. It demonstrates that vineyard owners are taking personal ownership of biosecurity more seriously and undertaking activities which have a direct biosecurity outcome at their core,” Inca said.

### What growers plan to do

The survey results highlighted several activities which more than 20 percent of South Australian vineyard owners indicated they would work to adopt over the coming three years. These included ensuring safe footwear (ensuring all people who come onto their vineyard disinfect their footwear, use shoe covers or wear footwear they provide), keeping a visitor log, delivering farm-gate hygiene training to staff, contractors and casual labour, and using biosecurity signs to advise restrictions of entry to their property.

“To varying degrees, these four activities require active input from vineyard owners to realise a biosecurity outcome, with associated cost and time implications,” Inca said. “We know that cost and time are two of the biggest barriers to farm-gate hygiene adoption, so it isn’t surprising that many vineyard owners are still yet to action these things.

“On the flipside, these results do show excellent intent from a considerable portion of vineyard owners to overcome the cost and time barriers, and clearly present an opportunity for Vinehealth Australia to support growers to convert this intent into action through workable solutions.”

### Continuous improvement required

Two farm-gate hygiene activities – ensuring safe footwear and keeping a visitor log – as well as restricting access to vineyards with fences and gates to a lesser degree, were identified by 25 percent of respondents as practices that they would not implement.

“Clearly barriers to adoption for these three activities need to be addressed to see improvements in uptake,” Inca said. “However, the considerable cost of fencing and often lack of available room outside vineyard plantings to erect a fence without sacrificing vines, will no doubt mean that this activity will only ever be partially adopted by vineyard owners.”

### Barriers to adoption

The two biggest barriers to adoption of farm-gate hygiene activities are time and money. These two barriers were well ahead of the third placed barriers of ‘not present 24/7’ and ‘multiple properties’ (see Figure 2).

The barriers listed in Figure 2 were grouped into five key categories (see Figure 3):

1. How to practically implement existing farm-gate hygiene solutions
2. Perceived risk versus benefit of implementing farm-gate hygiene practices
3. Time
4. Cost
5. Lack of knowledge of what practices to implement

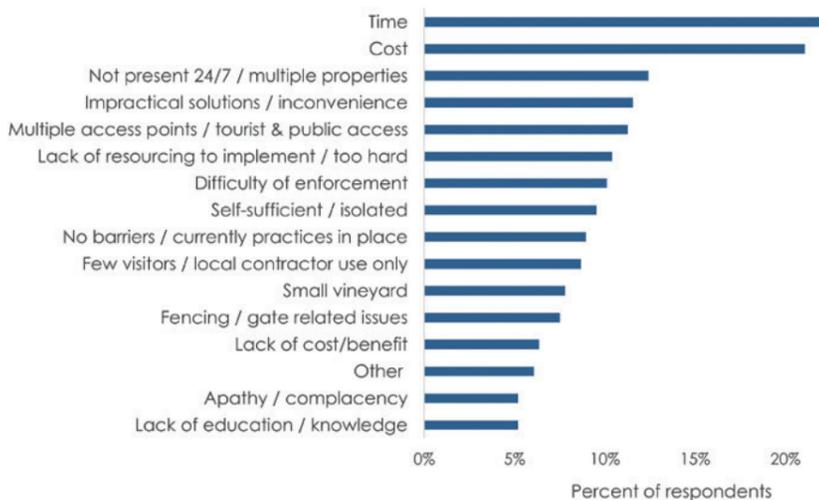
“A clear positive is the relatively low proportion (four percent) of responses indicative of vineyard owners not knowing ‘what’ farm-gate hygiene activities to implement,” Inca said.

“This result, in part, reflects the concerted effort of the Vinehealth team and others over the past five years to educate vineyard owners about what farm-gate hygiene practices are the most important to undertake.”

Groupings of the barriers has however highlighted the relatively high proportion (42 percent) of vineyard owners being unclear of ‘how’ to implement these nine key activities.

“From this survey, it’s clear that addressing the ‘how’ is key to increasing the broad adoption of farm-gate hygiene activities in vineyards, which comes as no surprise,” Inca said.

Figure 2. Barriers to putting in place farm-gate hygiene practices (respondents could identify up to three barriers).



“Providing ‘solutions across the grape and wine supply chain’ was identified as one of our key priority areas in our Strategic Agenda 2021 to 2026, and we are focused on delivering a range of projects in this area.

“We know that for wide-ranging adoption of farm-gate hygiene activities, the tools need to be effective, easy to use, and easily integrated into existing vineyard operations.”

Projects include a fit-for-purpose shoe cover as an alternative footwear solution to immersion in bleach or Dettol, being developed in conjunction with Stephanie Small of Small Design Co.

And a biosecurity toolkit is being developed to provide businesses with a guided approach on how to implement good

Figure 3. Key groupings of barriers to implementing farm-gate hygiene practices.

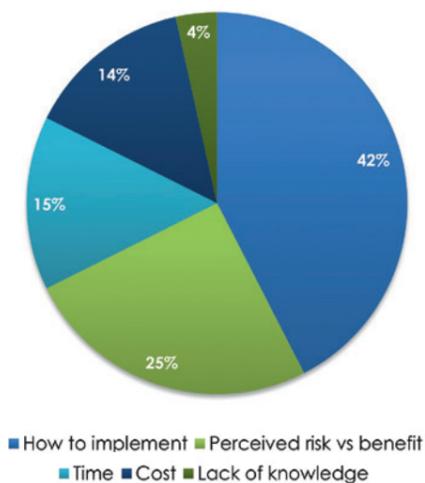


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biosecurity practice that is customised to the size and complexity of the business and aligns with requirements for those growers participating in the Sustainable Winegrowing Australia program.

“We’re also working on the development of the Digital Biosecurity Platform that will replace the Register, to deliver a vastly improved user experience for vineyard owners, for management of their farm-gate hygiene activities and vineyard data,” Inca said. ♦

For a topline report of the Vinehealth Australia 2021 South Australian Vineyard Owner Survey, visit <https://vinehealth.com.au/news/surveys/sa-vineyard-owner-survey/>

### Risky business

Another clear barrier grouping identified from the 2021 survey was perceived risk versus benefit (25 percent of responses).

This barrier was attributed to the respondents who indicated they are ‘self-sufficient/isolated’, have ‘few visitors and/or only use local contractors’, have a ‘small vineyard’, perceive a ‘lack of cost-benefit’ and admit to ‘apathy/complacency’.

“Vineyard owners will always have varying risk appetites around biosecurity, influenced by both their perceived severity of grapevine pests, diseases and pathogens that could be introduced to their properties, and the current known or assumed proximity of these pests to their properties,” Vinehealth Australia CEO Inca Lee said.

“Unfortunately, waiting until a pest is introduced into a region or onto a property before farm-gate hygiene practices are put in place is often too late and will result in loss of vineyard assets, greater costs by property owners to fund curative rather than preventative actions and costs associated with ongoing regulatory compliance.”



### Darren Kennedy: practical solutions needed

Riverland vineyard owner Darren Kennedy ranked his exposure to biosecurity risk at four out of five in the 2021 Vineyard Owner Survey, with five being very exposed.

Darren would like to undertake more farm-gate hygiene activities to protect his 52 hectares of winegrape and dried grapevines in the Glossop and Loveday sub-regions from pest, disease and weed threats, but says lack of time and the cost associated with key activities are barriers.

“I’ve always done the basics, like buying my planting material from reputable nurseries, inspecting my vines for any issues and only using machinery in my vineyard that doesn’t go out of the region, but I know I could do more,” Darren said.

“Fencing is a good example. I know that would keep people out of my vineyard but fencing 52 hectares of vines is expensive. And boundary fences are too restrictive on my daily work. We need tractors to get around end posts and fences would be in the way.”

While Darren likes the idea of setting up a visitor register and requiring people to sign in on arrival to his property, he hasn’t found a system that works for him.

“And I don’t want to introduce restrictions that will only affect me and my workers,” he said.

For smaller growers to adopt farm-gate hygiene, Darren said measures needed to be practical and cost effective.

He would also like to see more public education about biosecurity, particularly the need to respect farm spaces.

“The ABC has covered the damage that’s been done to canola and sunflower crops by tourists wanting to get a photo. Most people don’t give two thoughts about the crops they could be damaging,” he said.

“People understand it’s not kosher to grab an apple from a farmer’s apple tree, or grab grapes off the table grape bunches in someone’s vineyard – that’s stealing – but they wouldn’t think about the risk of tracking in a new pest or weed when they wander in to take a photo. That’s just as bad.”

Darren plans to use phylloxera-tolerant rootstocks for any new vine plantings and said this was important for future-proofing his vineyard.

“Growers need to understand the pest and production challenges they have now and the risks on the horizon. If you’re not looking into ways of mitigating those risks when you’re planting new vines, you’re a bit silly I think,” he said.